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ABSTRACT

A sample of approximately 50 educational organizations in England and Wales were invited to supply statistics or other information regarding where adults start their return to learning. Approximately two-thirds responded and also commented on the feasibility of collecting such data. Responses indicated a lack of "hard" quantitative information on adult learning routes. A finding was that existing student data may give a misleading picture of educational progression between different types and levels of learning simply because organizations do not ask for this kind of information. The project also examined what kind of evidence there was of movement between different forms and levels of learning and its implications. A preliminary issue was examination of expressed motives for learning. Much evidence indicated that adults engaged in learning for mainly instrumental reasons. The available quantitative evidence on progression from uncertificated learning to higher levels of study was limited and inconclusive. Evidence indicated that adult progression from a general adult or community education starting point to more advanced levels of education/training depended less on the subject or level of the initial course than on a range of diverse factors and preconditions, including personal factors, institutional linkages, and student support services. (Appendixes include a sample of responses to the 1991 White Paper "Education and Training for the 21st Century" and a 26-item bibliography.) (YLB)

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adult learning

a pilot investigation into adult learners' starting points and progression to further education and training

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Tracking Adult Learning Routes

A pilot investigation into adult learners' starting points and progression to further education and training

Veronica McGivney

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

This short project took place between September and November 1991. The report is based on documentary evidence and responses from about 35 institutions and organisations (listed in the Appendix). Quotations without bibliographical references have been extracted from letter and telephone responses to the enquiry.

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NIACE is the national body which represents the interests of everyone concerned with adult learning. It plays a central role in advising on developments in policy and practice in all forms of education and training for adults, promoting equal opportunity of access to all.

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Introduction

About three-and-a-half million adults enrol in some form of organised education every year (HMI, 1991b). Although they participate with a wide variety of purposes, the increasing priority placed on vocational education and training and courses leading to qualifications has led to an erosion of finance for courses which are not vocational, certificated or aimed at groups requiring basic education or language support. The proposals outlined in the 1991 White Paper on further education and training to make all but these kinds of courses self-sustaining would have effectively killed off many forms of adult provision or rendered them too expensive for huge numbers of people. Despite recent modification of the proposals, general adult education courses remain vulnerable, since curbs on local government expenditure have resulted in widespread reductions in the quantity and variety of formal and informal learning opportunities for adults. Yet the experience of many people working with adults is that a great number participate in general, uncertificated adult education programmes – both formal and informal – for instrumental reasons related to employment, self-employment or voluntary activities. There is also a widespread acceptance that such programmes provide for many adults, and especially those with negative school experiences and no qualifications, a crucial first step towards more advanced study, even though this may not have been foreseen or originally intended. The results of a national survey conducted in the 1980s provided:

> *'some support for the belief that experience on non-qualifying courses can be an important preliminary step on the road to high-level adult study [although it was impossible to determine from the collected data] how close a connection there may have been – in time, in content or simply in inspiring self-confidence or a renewed interest in learning – between a student's experience of non-qualifying courses and enrolment on a course leading to a qualification' (Woodley et al., 1987, 63–65).*

More recently, the Society of Education Officers has referred to local adult education services as 'a route to examination provision' ('Fatchett smites the White Paper Philistines', *Education*, 2 August 1991).

There is, however, little hard evidence currently available to demonstrate the extent to which general adult education (including adult basic education and English for speakers of other languages) acts as a springboard to other forms and levels of learning. Few adult, further and higher education institutions have systematically tracked the progression of their adult students. Nor, to date, has there been any large-scale national research into the destinations of adult students from the points at which they return to learning.

This gap in information on adult learners has been thrown into harsh relief by the 1991 proposals for further education which effectively assign a lesser value to courses that do not fall into the categories to be funded by the new further education funding councils. The hypothesis which the present pilot project set out to test was, therefore, that adult involvement in general and uncertificated learning, both formal and informal, often leads to participation in more advanced, certificated programmes of education or training.

This is not to imply that movement to higher level courses should be the prime goal of general adult education or that it should be regarded as the most appropriate form of progression for adult learners. Participation in education has a range of beneficial outcomes for individuals, of which further participation is only one. Nonetheless, at a time when the number of adults moving into further and higher education is growing rapidly, it is becoming increasingly important to have reliable empirical evidence about the routes which they take. Secondly, at a time when educational policy is moving towards assigning differential values to different forms of adult education, there is an urgent need to verify an outcome that many adult educators take for granted. The pilot project is a preliminary stage in such an investigation, and seeks to explore these key questions:

- to what extent do adults move from lower to higher levels of learning?
- how can we find out where students move to?
- who is collecting this information and how can it be collected?
- what are the issues involved in progression from one stage and form of learning to another?

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

More specifically the aims of the project were:

Primary aims

- to determine where adults, defined here as people over 19 with no or few qualifications and who have had a break since completing their initial education, start their return to learning
- to investigate the extent to which participation in general, uncertificated forms of adult learning lead to decisions to undertake more advanced, certificated education and training
- to identify the factors which favour or impede progression from a general adult education starting point to higher level and certificated training or study.

Secondary aims

- to investigate the extent to which information on adult learners' starting points and subsequent progression within education and training is recorded by organisations/institutions involved in providing education and training for adults

- to investigate the extent to which organisations/institutions involved in the education and training of adults would be prepared to seek and record this kind of information if they are not already doing so
- to identify the factors and issues involved in recording such information.

METHODS

The project was conducted between September and November 1991. It involved:

1. Contact with a sample of around 50 organisations and institutions in England and Wales, including:
   - educational guidance services/projects
   - open college networks/access consortia
   - long-term adult residential colleges
   - further education colleges
   - polytechnics and universities
   - LEA adult education/community education services
   - voluntary adult education providers
   - organisations concerned with access
   - individuals who have conducted investigations in a similar area.

   These were invited to supply statistics or other information relevant to the pilot study and to comment on the feasibility of collecting such data. (See Appendix 2 for a list of those who sent evidence, comments and suggestions.)

2. Search of relevant publications, research papers, articles, etc.

RESPONSES

This report is based on documentary evidence and responses from approximately two-thirds of the organisations and institutions contacted. Few respondents were able to provide quantitative data, as it is not yet common practice to collect information of this kind. However, several institutions and organisations were prepared to discuss with NIACE how to devise a suitable recording instrument. Others offered to collect information for the pilot project, although in some instances the time envisaged for doing so would have resulted in the information arriving too late to be included. In such cases, respondents were advised that their offer would be taken up if the opportunity to conduct a larger-scale project arose. Those offers which fitted into the time-scale of this project were accepted.

Some respondents who offered to send data subsequently experienced difficulty in collecting it in the time-scale proposed. According to a respondent from a further education college this was because: 'information collected in September/October may not be collated until December'. Others had problems persuading colleagues to collate the information because of work pressures. One AE organiser related that obtaining information for this project was: 'like getting blood out of a

stone'. Some respondents who sent information in the form of tables and print-outs omitted essential background details such as the year(s) to which the figures referred; the total student intake; the meaning of abbreviations and acronyms, etc. This generated a large amount of additional correspondence and phone calls. The experience was useful, however, in that it highlighted the meaninglessness of 'free-floating' statistics which are not set in context and lack vital background information. It also clarified some of the questions that would need to be asked of informants in a larger-scale exercise.

Collectively, the responses to the enquiry indicated that:

1. There is widespread acceptance of the need for a survey of this kind. The majority of respondents welcomed the NIACE initiative and asked to be kept informed. In several cases, the request for information acted as a catalyst at a time when institutions or individuals were thinking that they ought to be collecting information on adult starting points and destinations:

   'At last! We need something like this' (Guidance worker).

   'We all ought to be gathering this information' (LEA officer).

   'In reviewing our adult education provision we have become acutely aware of the lack of this kind of information. Quite clearly, information on outcomes needs to be sought and recorded systematically' (LEA officer).

2. There is a lack of 'hard' quantitative information on adult learning routes at a time when adult access to further and higher education, to training and vocational qualifications is attracting increasing attention. Although anecdotal evidence abounds and many respondents supplied impressive individual examples of progression from a community or adult education starting point to formal education, training or employment (see Figure 1 for some examples of this), few providers have comprehensively recorded the starting points and destinations of large groups of adult learners. In this respect, responses from further and higher education institutions were broadly similar:

   'There is little research data based on admissions but evidence of a more anecdotal kind from admissions tutors and others about successful progression from such things as WEA and extra-mural courses. At a fairly impressionistic level, one would say that for some students, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences, general adult education has been an important agency in their return to education' (Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic).

   'I am afraid we do not have our MIS system set up in such a way to yield that information but I can give you any number of anecdotal accounts of students who have begun on a non-vocational course and proceeded to other courses which have qualifications, and from which they have proceeded to higher education' (Accrington and Rossendale College).

CASE STUDY: Young Asian Man

Education	Other Responsibilities
	Unemployed; no qualifications.
Wine appreciation and book-keeping courses at Adult College.	
HND Business Studies at local Higher and Further Education College (plus adult education course in study skills to back-up his studies).	
	Trainee social work job.
GCSE English at Adult College.	
Post-graduate CQSW course.	

CASE STUDY: Young Woman

Education	Other Responsibilities
Referred by Local Youth Project to education advice service.	
Basic English, Cookery and Cake Decorating courses at Adult College.	*Young child in creche.*
Return to study Food Studies course at Adult College.	
Full-time cake decorating course at South Bank Polytechnic (using adult education for back-up English skills).	

CASE STUDY: Black Woman, aged 45

Education	Other Responsibilities
	Experienced in hotel trade prior to coming to England.
City and Guilds Cookery Certificate at Adult College.	
Catering qualification (job training scheme).	
French and Maths – non-certificated courses at Adult College.	*Looking after grandchildren while daughter completed Bar examinations.*
Diploma in Hotel Management at FE College. (Accepted at age 50 on the basis of her continued contact with education, as well as her undoubted ability.)	

CASE STUDY: Asian Woman, late 30s

Education	Other Responsibilities
	Arrived in UK with young family.
English as a Second Language class.	
	Daughter started infant school.
Self-confidence course at Adult College.	
ESOL/parent education course.	*Children at primary school.*
Pre-school Playgroup Foundation Course (inc. short placement) at Adult College.	*Creche assistant part-time at Adult College.*
	Full-time creche assistant at Adult College.

Figure 1. *Examples of Individual Progression*

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A survey conducted in south-west Wales suggests that no type of institution currently collects data on student progression. There, neither the adult basic education service nor any of seven adult, further and higher education institutions could supply data to demonstrate the role uncertificated adult education and community education plays in decisions made by mature students to take up certificated learning programmes in FE or HE:

> *'although one tertiary college estimated that 20% of students progress to FE/HE, and it was agreed among colleagues that many students progress from informal learning onto certificated courses. In the Basic Education Department, many students who originally come for basic help eventually go on to take examinations' (South West Wales Open College and Access Consortium).*

3. The data that has been collected may give a misleading picture of adult movement between different types and levels of learning simply because organisations do not ask for this kind of information.

4. There are a number of practical difficulties involved in collecting and recording evidence on educational progression.

DIFFICULTIES IN RECORDING INFORMATION

The majority of respondents referred to difficulties they felt would hamper attempts to obtain the kind of information sought. In most cases these involved inadequate information systems, administrative pressures, high staff workloads and financial constraints. Many people pointed out that the costs of tracking all adult students other than those participating in courses where progression is the expected outcome – Access, Return to Learn, etc. – would be prohibitive. One respondent from a further education college commented: 'We have thousands of students and it could cost a bomb to track them all.'

Collection of student data is not always computerised and methods of collection vary considerably between institutions, even within the same local authority. It can also vary within a single institution, with different kinds of data being collected at different points in the administrative structure, sometimes according to the type of course, sometimes according to the responsibilities and interests of course teams and individual staff members: 'on an individual level, some course tutors will have information of this kind, others will not' (FE college staff member).

Higher education institutions keep records of mature student applications, acceptances and outcomes, broken down according to gender, age and ethnic group. However, they do not always record post-school educational background, although this information may be sought for some categories of student, for example Access students.

Several respondents from further and higher education institutions referred to external factors that have had a negative impact on the

extent and nature of student records such as institutional restructuring, political shifts and staff changes.

Respondents from some guidance projects and open college networks reported that they do not yet have fully-computerised recording systems and lack the staff resources to undertake the manual searches necessary to collect the data, particularly in cases where there are thousands of record cards. In Manchester Open College Federation, for example, there are over 25,000 registered students:

> *'We have no doubt after 10 years that people move on but their progress is not yet systematically logged or computerised.'*

The responses from further education institutions indicate that Computerised Management Information Systems (CMIS) are not generally programmed to give information on the starting points and destinations of students: 'There are problems and challenges with the MIS in extracting this kind of data' (Royal Forest of Dean College). A respondent from South Bristol College, however, had used their system (Fretwell Downing) to track the entry of one cohort of students from a community base: 'the task is enormous but it can be done.'

Gaps in recorded information

One of the findings of the pilot exercise was that existing student data may give a misleading picture of educational progression between different types and levels of learning simply because organisations do not ask for information on individuals' previous post-school educational experience. For example, educational guidance records provided by the Open College and Access Consortium in South-West Wales showed that, in a given period, only 35 out of a sample of 1,030 adults moved from informal or uncertificated adult or community education into certificated education or training in further or higher education. This seemed a low figure compared with some guidance service findings, and when queried it was explained that this was because much of the data on enquirers, records only the suggestions and recommendations made to them, with no mention of any prior learning experience.

Sometimes there is an assumption that people moving into further or higher education will automatically mention their post-school learning experience. However, a respondent from an Open College Network pointed out that, for various reasons, enrolling students may not mention that they have been in the system before: because they are not asked for this information; because they do not consider it to be relevant, or because a substantial interval may have elapsed since their earlier participation. A further reason was suggested by a polytechnic staff member with 12 years' experience in guiding adult students from 'both sides of the divide'. She argued that adult students may not mention adult education participation because they consider it to be of 'low status' in a climate that attaches priority to work-related programmes and qualifications:

> *'The student may fear that it carries no status and will not be perceived as relevant. Furthermore, many students now are*

> *advised to follow an accredited course before entry, which means they are even less likely to mention earlier education.'*

Even when enrolment forms are designed to elicit information on previous educational experience, the questions asked may not be sufficiently explicit. Students in one London college:

> *'are asked on the enrolment form whether they attended "another college" in the previous year. Whether they include adult education in this depends on their interpretation of the question.'*

Existing records of adult learners therefore tend not to disclose their prior learning routes, either because that information has not been specifically sought or because of the way questions have been framed. Furthermore, it is by no means an easy matter to follow up all the people who have left a centre or institution, as discovered in an evaluation of adult learner experience in a project for the unemployed:

> *'One way is by simply quantifying the number of people who move subsequently to full-time education and employment. However, there are problems in simply adopting such an approach. First, it is difficult to follow up what happens to everybody who attends the College. Some move away (sometimes to gain employment); many stop using the centres. Sometimes this may be because the project has served its purpose in the sense that individuals outgrow the centres and move on to do other things. In a few cases it may mean that the individual has slipped back into isolation and depression at home. However, I was able to talk to a number of people who no longer regularly attend the centre and in each case this was because they had become involved in other activities: employment, voluntary work, full-time education. Second, it is not possible to prove cause and effect in relation to individual decision-making; it is usually with hindsight that people recognise the key influences in their lives' (Formby, 1989, 13).*

Geographical and institutional variations

Even if effective methods of tracking learners from their re-entry points were established, the diversity of education and training provision, together with geographical variations in the extent and nature of available opportunities, would make it extremely difficult to extract a meaningful picture. Adult learners cannot move on unless there are appropriate and accessible education and training opportunities to move on to. In Britain the extent of collaboration between adult, further and higher education institutions varies considerably. There are also huge differences between institutions in their recruitment and admissions practices and in their arrangements for student support – all of which have an impact on the numbers of mature learners moving between different parts of the system. In areas well endowed with education and training provision, with open college or access federations, with link and bridge courses enabling movement between levels and good educational guidance services, one might expect a high rate of progression.

In areas less well endowed, one would expect a low rate. Statistics on adult progression may not reflect these disparities:

> *'Although clientele analyses conducted by different organisations and institutions do yield some kind of census of a local area or programme, they make serious analysis difficult if not impossible due to a lack of a comparison group, adequate sampling of the relevant "hinterland" or an explanatory framework to put the findings into perspective' (Courtney, 1992, 19).*

Even in areas with good inter-agency links, collection of data can be extremely difficult. Cost considerations aside, it would be a huge and complex task to collate information from a number of disparate organisations and institutions in which student records may vary substantially in quantity and quality.

According to a respondent from the Open University, there are a number of factors which any tracking exercise needs to take into account, including:

> *'How helpful the previous course was in encouraging mature students to proceed further. This is likely to be related to the length of the interval and the relevance of the previous course. Other important factors are school qualifications; whether there is any post-school experience before community education; and the nature of the mainstream course they have entered. Sorting this out involves analysing educational careers and looking for linkages not just between various mainstream courses and previous adult and community education courses but also between other courses and school qualifications' (Communication from Dr Nick Farnes, the Open University).*

This suggests two things: firstly, that thorough tracking of adult progression would involve such a volume of detailed investigation that it may only be feasible to conduct small-scale exercises involving small samples of students; secondly, that a complex mixture of factors influences and determines movement from one level of learning to another.

Diversity of adult learners

The difficulties involved in tracking people's movement through different levels of learning are further exacerbated by the diversity of adults themselves and the variations in their participation patterns. Many have domestic and employment circumstances which result in a sporadic and irregular involvement in education. This, combined with the diversity of learning interests and purposes, means that adult participation in education or training may not necessarily be linear in the sense of a steady upward movement from one level to another. One researcher found that post-basic education students:

> *'moved into and out of institutions as and when they required support for work situations and for further study. They seldom moved in a straight line through the educational provision ...*

> *Students do not necessarily start in one class and progress smoothly to another. Some jump directly into more formally organised advanced classes if that's what they need and some might never progress past general literacy classes. They would not be interested in pursuing that route. They may want to move to alternative classes for a variety of reasons' (Temple, 1991).*

For a number of reasons, therefore, adult movement between different forms and levels of education is not a straightforward process that is easy to monitor. Nonetheless there are signs that institutions and organisations are becoming aware of the need to collect more detailed data and some have started to compile computerised records of student progression. The project set out to examine what kind of evidence there is of movement between different forms and levels of learning, and its implications.

1. Expressed Motives For Learning

Any consideration of adult 'progression' needs to take into account expressed learning goals. The notion that adults participate in general, uncertificated learning primarily for leisure or recreational purposes is largely refuted by the evidence that has been collected for this project. Much of this indicates that adults engage in informal as well as formal learning for mainly instrumental reasons. A recent NIACE national survey found that vocationally-related subjects head the list of preferences in formal learning, with learning about computers the subject most often mentioned by informal learners (Sargant, 1991).

Data supplied by the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Gwent shows a marked predilection among participants to undertake informal learning to help them in their own businesses, a trend confirmed by evidence from local education authorities and providing institutions. Hampshire LEA has reported that the majority of adults taking 'leisure courses' do so for vocational reasons. A survey of students at adult education institutes and further education colleges revealed 'an amazing number' of work-related purposes identified as reasons for enrolling: over 50% of students had joined a class for work-related reasons, while just under 25% were self-employed and thought that the course would assist them in their own businesses (*The Higher*, 9 August, 1991).

A survey conducted in Wandsworth in 1987 showed that nearly 30% of adults on all courses in the borough were following them for work-related reasons. In Northamptonshire, 44% of 7,541 students enrolled in adult education in the autumn term 1990 to help with work, to gain qualifications and to help with community work. (Information supplied by Dr David Wilson, Northamptonshire LEA.) The same pattern of motives is reflected in educational guidance enquiries. During its first year of operation (1990–91), the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Abercynon Community Education Centre, Mid Glamorgan, received over 400 enquiries, of which 36% were to do with job change. The other stated purposes were:

14% personal development	5% training
11% return to learning	4% redundancy
8% vocational education	2% leisure interests
7% finance for study	1% retirement
6% alternatives to unemployment	1% personal factors.
5% general education	

The first follow-up stage showed that by September 1991, 34% of enquirers had approached education providers, 26% had enrolled in formal study programmes and 3% in informal learning.

In a rural area of the Midlands, virtually all of a hundred enquirers visiting a Skillsbus offering computerised information, educational guidance and employment information: 'asked questions about courses with the clear intention of obtaining paid employment, updating and enhancing skills or changing careers' (Melton Mowbray College, 1991, 34).

A survey conducted in Norwich and Thetford found that nearly 300 adults seeking or involved in training to give them marketable skills had taken a total of 218 formal (organised) learning programmes since leaving compulsory education. Of these:

37% were work-related, award bearing programmes
28% were general education (Access courses, Return to Learning, O- and A-level courses) undertaken in order to gain access to higher education and training
15% were 'leisure' (defined as social and recreational) activities
13% were employer-sponsored training courses (DeBell and Davies, 1991)
7% were government-funded training programmes such as YTS and ET.

The dominance of instrumental purposes has also been identified within special provision. An HMI survey has found that: 'all students in adult basic education wish to improve their basic skills in order to gain employment, progress in their job or to help their children with reading' (HMI, 1991b, 19). To illustrate this the HMI report cites the range of motives among participants in a beginners' class in Welsh as a second language:

- A woman of European origin wanted to become a voluntary helper in a Welsh playgroup attended by her child.
- A builder who had married into a Welsh-speaking family needed a knowledge of the language for family and work purposes.
- A husband and wife who had retired to Wales wished to learn the language of the area.
- A man working in public services wanted knowledge of the language to improve his promotion prospects.
- A married couple wanted to keep pace with their children's grasp of the language and understand and participate in the social and cultural life of Wales.
- A woman in her 60s sought mental stimulus and the opportunity to interact with fellow students (HMI, 1991b, 19).

A survey of basic education students in London found that they also tend to participate in so-called leisure courses for work-related purposes, for example learning the skills with which to set up a small business such as dress-making, or learning a language for use at work (Temple, 1991).

This kind of evidence is largely confirmed by surveys elsewhere. In his overview of participation research in the United States over the last 50 years, Courtney found a persistent feature was that adult education is most likely to be pursued for practical or vocational reasons connected

with the world of work 'although a number of subsidiary motives such as to become better informed, to meet other people may also be involved' (Courtney, 1992, 50).

The prevalence of instrumental motives should be treated with some caution, however. Individuals often participate in learning programmes for a number of reasons. When asked to define these, some may find it simpler to express a simple, concrete and easily understood purpose for their involvement than to disentangle the mesh of inter-related and perhaps not fully recognised motives that have led them to take this step:

> *'People as learners do not easily differentiate between what is vocational and what is non-vocational. These are terms used by politicians, funders and some providers. The breadth of people's interests is clear and it cuts across such boundaries' (Sargant, 1991, 20).*

In spite of this proviso, there is widespread evidence that some of the most popular courses for adults – computer studies, modern languages, art and design – are attended mainly for instrumental reasons. A survey in Wandsworth revealed that a large proportion of people attending introductory uncertificated courses in these subjects were doing so for 'specific vocational purposes' (Wandsworth Adult College, 1987, cited by Fatchett and Smith, 1991). The 1990 NIACE national survey also showed that two of the most popular subjects among adults are foreign languages and computer studies, which are frequently studied for reasons related to employment (Sargant, 1991). The Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Gwent reports 'a great interest' in word processing, computing and Women into Technology. The Committee of Directors of Polytechnics in its response to the 1991 White Paper on Further Education and Training has asserted that: 'courses such as languages, art and design have a potential vocational orientation that clearly justifies a continued public investment.'

These subjects are also the ones where there is some evidence of progression to higher levels of study. At the Royal Forest of Dean College: 'experience tells us that the most common form of progression is in the field of languages and computing', while data from the London Open College Federation (1989–90) also reveals that students tend to move on in these curriculum areas, as well as in community organisation skills, home tutor training, art, design, fashion, biology, music and courses with an explicit progression aim: foundation, ESOL, Return to Learn and Access courses.

2. Progression from Uncertificated Learning to Higher Levels of Study

The available quantitative evidence on progression is limited and inconclusive. Sometimes respondents could supply only estimates. A tertiary college in West Glamorgan, for example, estimated that 20% of participants (more than two-thirds female) in uncertificated courses progress to FE, HE or training but could supply: 'no hard evidence to support these figures'. Not surprisingly, there is more information on the destinations of adult students on courses designed to encourage progression than on other courses.

ACCESS AND BRIDGING COURSES

In Wales, Challenge 2 – a 36-week course focusing on communication skills and local and environmental studies – has been 'designed to get adults into learning'. It is free, offered in the daytime, in modular form and with optional accreditation. Between 1985 and 1988, 57% of participants were unemployed and 31% unwaged; the majority (over 60%) were aged between 25 and 45. Follow-up of 43% of participants revealed that 23% found employment; 10% moved into further education; 5% into continuing education, and 5% into higher education. Assuming roughly similar percentages for the 57% of students whom it was not possible to follow up, this would suggest an overall rate of progression to other learning programmes of at least 40%.

Some data has been collected on Access course students. High progression rates have been recorded in the former ILEA where: '93% of students with known destinations took up a higher or further education place after completing their Access course' (HMI, 1991b, 21). Very high progression rates have also been recorded for participants in long-term adult residential colleges where courses act as Access courses to higher education. At Hillcroft College, for example, 60 of the 73 enrolled full-time students in 1990–91 gained the CNAA Certificate of Higher Education (Hillcroft College, 1991).

Information supplied by educational guidance services and adult education providers suggests that many students who enrol in Access courses reach them via a lower level adult or community education route. Information from South Cheshire College, for example, shows that the majority – 39 out of 46 – of mature students on Access (to HE) courses in Autumn 1991 had been previously involved in non-examination/accredited courses. Data from the Educational Guidance Service for Adults in Gwent also suggests that people who return to learning in

community education and ESOL often subsequently enrol in Access courses. Access students' subsequent progress through higher level courses is not always logged: 'Institutions and LEAs are less successful in obtaining data about long-term progression and there are inadequate statistics on the numbers of Access students completing higher education courses' (HMI, 1989, 21).

The Open College of the North West, however, maintains a record of the progress of students entering higher education on the basis of satisfactory completion of Open College courses.

OTHER PROGRESSION ROUTES

The following is a list of the learning destinations of people involved in community education in Gwent in 1990:

50+	moved to FE computing classes and 'many' moved from community education typing classes to FE and RSA word processing courses. In Autumn 1991 more than 50 were waiting to join computer and word processing courses organised in an FE college by the community education service
20	joined full- and part-time Women into Technology courses organised by the community education service in an FE college with built-in progression into mainstream courses
10	people enrolled on Access courses and a further 7 were waiting for the results of their application
4	women from a machine-knitting class enrolled in FE book-keeping and business studies courses to assist in setting up their own businesses
2	women enrolled in book-keeping courses to support self-employed husbands
4	enrolled in BTEC courses
3	enrolled in an FETC course
2	enrolled in FE counselling courses (with an option of progressing into HE)
2	went into FE courses in accountancy (moving to HE in the second year)
2	enrolled in full-time, six-year hair and beauty care course
1	person from a flower-arranging course enrolled at an agricultural college with a view to starting her own floristry business
1	joined the School of Physiotherapy
1	former ESOL student enrolled in a full-time HE course.

This confirms some of the statements on subject choice made earlier by showing the overall dominance of computer/word-processing studies in adult choices for progression, with Women into Technology and Access courses the next most popular subjects.

Some colleges which provide a mixture of non-vocational and vocational work, with some outreach and bridging routes, find it useful to

track the movement of students between parts of the system. At the Royal Forest of Dean College:

> *'About 75% of adult participants in outreach work, programmes or tasters proceed to mainstream programmes, although this progression may take place over a period longer than a year. Twenty-nine out of 38 people who participated in Return to Learn courses (1990–91) have since joined vocational courses within the College. Twenty-eight out of 187 adults who attended 10-week non-vocational courses for adults with special needs have since joined vocational courses.'*

Existing evidence suggests that it is more common (as it is probably a more straightforward exercise) to track the progress of students on Return to Learn and Access courses or those with particular learning needs than to try and look at the destinations of adult learners as a whole. Progression from an adult or community education starting point has been observed in relation to several specific groups of adult students:

Older learners

One of the findings of an Open University research project on students over 60 was that the older undergraduates in the OU were drawn from a community of older adults involved in education: 'Most have usually taken evening classes or other courses and apply to the OU in order to study subjects in greater depth. For many there is the added attraction of making up for missed opportunities by doing a degree' (Kelly, 1989).

Literacy students

A follow-up of former literacy students (the majority of them black) in London found that almost all of them moved from basic education courses to college courses or employment in spite of obstacles such as poverty, race and gender (Temple, 1991).

Unemployed students

Surveys of unemployed participants in general education courses have revealed that these often act as a route to vocational education, certificated education and employment. An HMI inspection of work with unemployed adults in colleges found that they:

> *'attend a much wider range of courses than that traditionally described as "vocational". For example, video and writers' workshops have enabled students to become script-writers and video-makers; cake decorating classes have turned out successful small business-women and Access courses have enabled black students to progress to higher education and become teachers and social workers' (HMI, 1991a).*

Women

There is substantial evidence that women, more than any other group, make use of local adult and community education opportunities, including those provided by local voluntary organisations, to make their way back into formal education or employment. Summarising the findings of the NIACE national survey, Naomi Sargant asserts that non-working and part-time working women often study languages, handicrafts, arts and cultural subjects as a first step back into formal education. This is confirmed by other evidence:

- a cake-icing course at Wandsworth Adult College was attended by 16 black women: 4 were there just to ice cakes; 4 were going to set up their own small businesses; 4 subsequently joined basic education classes and 4 enrolled in a City and Guilds catering course (information from Wandsworth Adult College, 1991).
- a survey of women who had participated in Open University community education programmes in an area of multiple deprivation in Scotland revealed that over 50% had subsequently moved into other education programmes:

> *'After taking one or more short OU community education courses, 34 out of 60 students went on to a range of 55 non-OU courses, the most popular being vocational courses such as nursing, secretarial, computer use, cooking, sewing, childminding, playleading, etc., followed by academic courses (O and H grades and modular courses). Twenty-three of the 34 who went into non-OU courses said that the OU course had helped them. The OU courses were significantly more helpful for those going into non-OU courses who had not previously continued their education between leaving school and starting their first OU course' (information supplied by Dr Nick Farnes, the Open University).*

Interviews conducted with 22 women in a low-populated rural area seven miles from Melton Mowbray found that all but two had been or were engaged at the time in adult education classes such as dressmaking, crafts, badminton, tennis, keep fit, yoga, pottery, GCSE English. The majority had responded to invitations to attend the interviews as they were anxious to engage in other learning activities (Melton Mowbray College, 1991).

The learning or training activities provided by women's voluntary organisations frequently act as a launching pad for women who would not have gone directly into formal education or training. For example, about five-and-a-half thousand students a year take courses at the National Federation of Women's Institutes' residential centre, Denman College, and for many this acts as a first step back into education:

> *'Women ... are unlikely to dive straight into a vocational course. They gain confidence by first trying a user-friendly "leisure" course. For many, a non-vocational course is the first stage in returning to the job market. Our organisation is full of women who now take an active part in public life and who took their first step through non-vocational courses' (Davies, 1991)*

STUDENT PROGRESSION

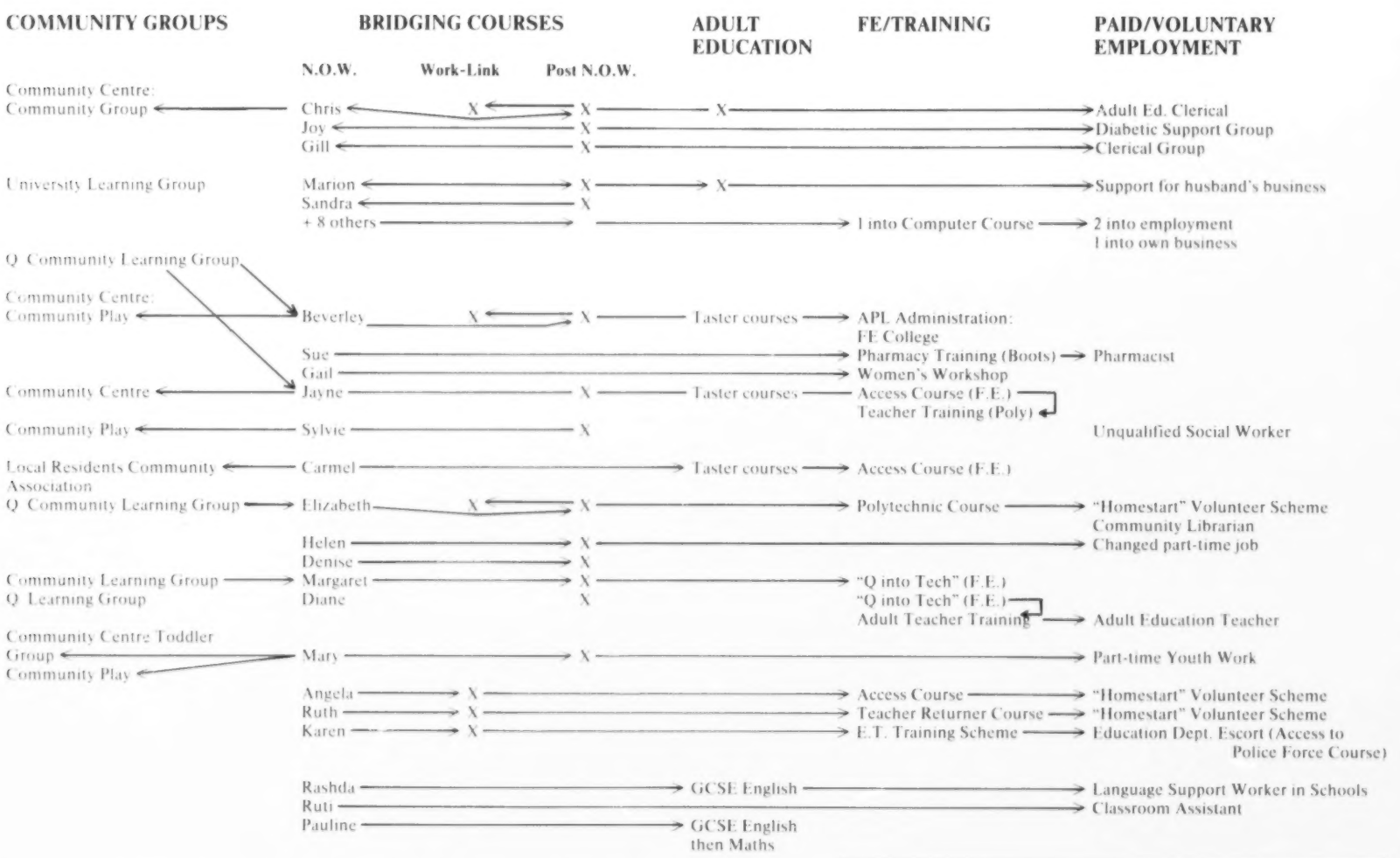

Figure 2. *Informal community education, further education and employment.*

(Source: Beryl Bateson, Community Development Officer, Birmingham)

Because of their domestic constraints and fragmented working patterns, women's educational progression is not always in one direction. Figure 2 tracks the movement of one group of women in a deprived area of Birmingham in the late 1980s between informal community learning and other levels of education and employment. It illustrates the way in which women move backwards and forwards between community learning, bridging courses and more advanced, higher level formal courses according to their circumstances, interests and needs.

Progression via informal community learning

Figure 2 also illustrates the fact that for groups who are generally under-represented in formal education and training, there can be an earlier, pre-access stage in educational progression: i.e. the starting point for learning is often in community activities and projects. These frequently lead to the formation of informal community learning groups which in turn stimulate individuals to join formally organised education. This process, which has been tracked in an evaluation of community learning for women in Northern Ireland (McGivney, 1990), is also illustrated in data provided by Penarth Community Education Service on people involved in community-based groups. These consisted in the main of 'people who do not normally attend mainstream adult education activities'. Records for the year 1989–90 show that about 40% of the individuals who had engaged in community projects (focused on women, health, special needs, parenting and the elderly) progressed into 'mainstream' adult education or other learning activities. Of a sample of 131 (many of them on income support and other state benefits), 24 joined adult education classes; 11 joined learning groups in a voluntary organisation; 8 entered pre-employment training; 4 went into GCSE and ESOL classes; 3 into FE and HE, and 3 into a Women's Workshop. The overwhelming majority of people who moved on were in the parents' groups (and therefore, one can assume, women).

Although a short 'snapshot' exercise of this kind can only yield fragmented and unconnected evidence, it can suggest trends and raise important questions about the conditions that lead to adult progression within a learning context.

3. Factors Influencing Movement Between Types and Levels of Learning

FACTORS THAT FACILITATE PROGRESSION

The available evidence indicates that adult progression from a general adult or community education starting point to more advanced levels of education/training depends less on the subject or level of the initial course than on a range of diverse factors and preconditions. Documentary sources and responses to the pilot project imply that factors which strongly influence decisions to move from one level of education to another are:

1. Personal factors such as age, gender, social class, race, employment situation and place of residence. The time-scale for this study was too short to allow for the investigation of the relative impact of such factors on individual progression between learning programmes.

2. Initial educational experience, school-leaving age and level of educational achievement (qualifications).

3. The 'quality' of the initial return to learning experience.

4. The existence of well-defined progression routes such as structured levels of study within Open College Networks (OCNs) and adult-specific bridging or access programmes designed to attract people wishing to move into formal learning (Return to Learn, Access, Foundation or College Link courses). These are all: 'forms of adult education which prompt consideration of progression and nurture links with other sectors' (polytechnic staff member).

5. Links and collaboration between different sectors and institutions. In Figure 2, for example, 'facility of movement between different types and levels of education is enabled by an area network approach as opposed to an individual group or centre approach'. Links between sectors and institutions are facilitated by mechanisms such as franchising arrangements, OCNs or Access consortia.

6. Systems of credit accumulation and transfer. The acquisition of credit for any level of learning motivates people and compensates for earlier 'failure'. Linked credit systems allow people to cross sectoral boundaries, to achieve lower credit levels in a familiar local context and gradually gain the confidence to move to more advanced study in a formal education environment. A Level 4

credit offered within an OCN should facilitate adult progression into higher education.

7. Systems to accredit prior learning and experience acquired outside a formal learning context.

8. Staff encouragement and knowledge of other educational opportunities. The evidence suggests that many adults are introduced to structured learning opportunities and to credit transfer schemes, such as those operated in OCNs, by tutors or staff at enrolment evenings: 'Students don't move unless someone takes the initiative. Here when people move on it's nearly always because staff have taken the initiative. There's got to be an awareness among staff in adult education' (staff member, South Nottinghamshire College).

9. Good educational information and guidance services.

10. Flexible further and higher education systems which give mature students time to make choices: 'Non-standard students enter with a far less clear idea of what they want to graduate in than school leavers. We need to give them a chance to rediscover subjects and to move away from school-induced phobias' (staff member, Middlesex Polytechnic).

11. Lower level, uncertificated or taster courses provided within a further education institution, with built-in flexibility enabling movement to mainstream courses. Up to 10% of mainstream students in South Nottinghamshire College: 'come from uncertificated courses run within the institution, compared with about 1% from courses run outside. If they're in adult education outside they don't make the connection.' The Return to Learn course at Royal Forest of Dean College: 'is designed to progress adults back into education. The support inherent in the provision is in introducing the learner to their next tutor and sometimes in accompanying them to that first mainstream session, having first negotiated with the tutor.'

12. Modularised or unit-based courses. The evidence suggests that while modularisation does not guarantee progression, it does facilitate it. At Middlesex Polytechnic: 'the faculties with modular degree schemes have far greater numbers of non-standard students than those which do not.'

13. Course timing and delivery that fit in with adults' circumstances and needs, for example part-time and flexible modes of attendance.

14. Adequate student support mechanisms and services: 'Factors such as timing, cost, transport and child-care facilities are generally as important to students as curriculum content or vocational orientation ... Creche provision in particular can bring students into adult or further education who would not otherwise have considered it as an available option' (Clarke, 1989, 38).

15. Learning support in areas such as Study Skills, Literacy, Numeracy, English or Welsh language.

16. Curriculum design, teaching and learning methods that take account of students' lack of prior formal educational experience, lack of confidence, etc.

17. Positive measures to attract under-represented groups. Educational institutions committed to increasing the participation of adults in non-participant categories often develop an adult-oriented image and ethos that encourages people to move to them from lower level courses offered outside.

18. Special initiatives to create or increase progression routes. A work-related FE Development Fund Project in a rural area aimed: 'to work from existing fragmented initiatives to create a systematic approach to progression routes for women.' The project involved:

    - taster sessions in technology and computing in outreach centres
    - piloting of modular programmes designed to support women in moving to self-employment and enterprise initiatives
    - contact/guidance opportunities in conjunction with the Careers Service and using a mobile TAP
    - curriculum arrangements within the college to support progression to further training:

    'The development of the access framework has brought with it a major realignment of the curriculum at the college. Reception and initial guidance have been improved; a "starting points" session every Monday morning receives women who want to talk about possible options; people can be referred to Careers, and assistance is available on financial and welfare rights and grants issues. The need to respond quickly to the interests expressed by women returning to education and training has led to the development of flexible learning in workshops and open access facilities in various curriculum areas' (Melton Mowbray College, 1991, 37).

19. Special recruitment measures designed to attract adults to training/education: information days, education days or fairs, open days, etc. South Nottinghamshire College offers day schools – a week of non-vocational programmes which 'are really effective in getting people in'. Although it is hard to identify the exact impact of such events (which often attract people who have already identified a learning interest or need), follow-up sometimes shows that they prompted or accelerated decisions to return to education. Seventy out of 106 women who attended Wider Horizons days held in the north-east during 1990 to familiarise women with local education and training opportunities participated in follow-up interviews three months later. By this time:

33% were involved in education/training
18% had sought information and advice on education and training from organisations such as EASAs, Job Clubs, local colleges
10% had found employment
6% were actively seeking work
4% had become involved in voluntary work (Focus on Women Consultancy Group, 1991).

FACTORS THAT HINDER PROGRESSION

In any geographical area or institution, the rate of adult movement between different levels of learning will depend heavily on the existence of facilitating factors such as those listed above. The usefulness of Return to Learn, access and support programmes for groups such as those with basic education needs may be limited if they are not co-ordinated with higher levels of education or training. In some areas, however, lack of clear progression routes between learning levels and absence of links between providing institutions impede access to and across the range of education and training opportunities. A survey of post-literacy students in one part of London revealed both an absence of links between the adult and further education sectors and a lack of provision in further education for adults who learn slowly (Clarke, 1989, 38). Follow-up of participants in the Wider Horizon days mentioned above also revealed that some women who subsequently approached further education institutions received no help, advice or encouragement and 'came out with nothing'.

Although inter-agency networks and consortia of further and higher education institutions have increased, the extent of collaboration between adult, further and higher education institutions still varies considerably. In 1989 an HMI report commented on the tendency for institutional initiatives to widen access to be *ad hoc*, disparate and unco-ordinated and often inadequately underpinned by wider institutional policy (HMI, 1989). Although the majority of higher education institutions now have access co-ordinators, there are still huge differences between institutions in their recruitment and admissions policies, the extent of their Access course arrangements and arrangements for student support. Some institutions provide few transition courses and support measures to help adult learners move from non-vocational short courses; others, like South Bristol College, have developed a web of interlinked learning opportunities underpinned by a comprehensive guidance and student support system. In Keighley College, the Division of Adult Continuing Education has established coherent learning routes for adults, offering different levels of courses and a diversity of interlinked progression opportunities (Figure 3).

Other factors which hinder progression have been identified as:

1. Lack of local opportunities. A survey of Open University students aged over 60 found their participation was due in part to a lack of accessible and appropriate local opportunities to meet their further learning needs: 'Older learners who pursue their learning through private reading or take some classes and then look for a more

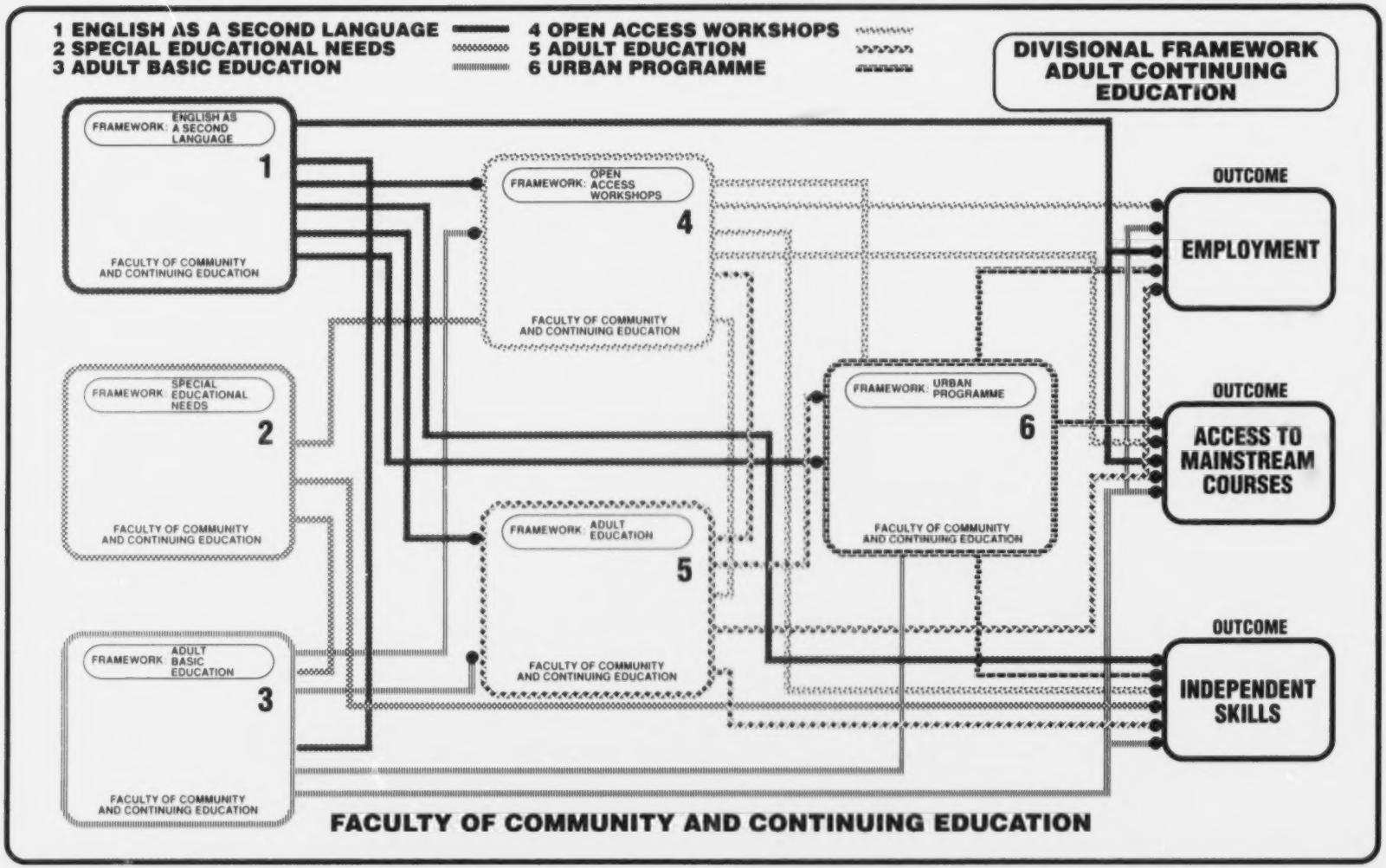

Figure 3. *Interlinked progression routes, Keighley College.*

structured programme of studies often discover that few courses are available locally or are offered for part-time study. Some then turn to the OU because it offers a modular structure, is largely home-based and there are no entrance requirements' (Kelly, 1989, 10–13).

2. Discrimination against older students applying for certain courses which: 'appears to be linked with the increased emphasis on "vocational commitment" as a qualification for selection in FE' (Clarke, 1989, 38).

3. Lack of staff encouragement. It may take time for students returning to education after a long gap and for those who did not enjoy their initial educational experience to overcome their lack of confidence. In these cases, individual transition to more advanced levels of learning may depend heavily on the advice of adult education tutors, some of whom may be reluctant to refer students on if they feel that the system will not respond to their needs or that there is a risk of failure: 'students often expect tutors to take responsibility for deciding when the student is ready to move on and for guiding them in appropriate directions. Many tutors felt ambivalent about encouraging students to move on because the fear of failure and disappointment is based on real experiences which often take a long time to overcome' (Clarke, 1989, 38).

4. Lack of institutional support mechanisms. If there is no practical or personal support for adult students who move into formal education or training, they may either drop out or return to their original learning base. This process has been observed with some post-basic education students: 'Students who have been right through the education system come back to the support they know exists for them at the Reading Centre. There may be no other options for these students' (Temple, 1991, 25).

5. Lack of financial assistance for adult students. The cumulative effects of this are well summarised in the Wandsworth Education Shop 1990–91 annual report: 'Student finance remains the greatest barrier for our enquirers and this situation has deteriorated over the past year with the freezing of mandatory grant levels, the loss of housing benefit for students and reduction in funds available for discretionary awards through Wandsworth Council. Government loan schemes and Access funds have not proved to be an adequate replacement for previous systems. Course fees have been affected by budget cuts, with colleges seeking to raise funds through full-cost courses. This has resulted in some valuable provision being unavailable to our users, many of whom are on low incomes' (Wandsworth Education Shop, 1991, 14).

6. Lack of adequate childcare support. 'Childcare provision remains a major hurdle for parents wishing to return to study and employment. Wandsworth Adult College remains the only provider with childcare facilities within the borough. The collapse of funding for childcare within Employment Training left some trainees without the means of continuing their training. The closure of council day

nurseries, community nurseries and loss of childcare subsidies has made returning to study impossible for many women on low incomes in the Borough' (Wandsworth Education Shop, 1991, 15).

7. Personal and employment circumstances. In follow-up interviews with women who had attended Wider Horizons days in the north-east, 20% of participants reported that they had taken no action because they were employed on short-term contracts which had not come to an end, because of ill health (self or family member), or because of changes in their family circumstances.

8. Loss of funding for educational guidance services. Several respondents to this project were worried that lack of continuing support for local guidance services would significantly hinder adult learners' movement between different levels of education and training.

9. Loss of special programmes. Loss of pump-priming programmes such as REPLAN which enabled the introduction of some new access programmes for non-traditional or under-represented adult students. Many of the computer studies progression routes used by adults in Newport Gwent 'were established because of funding from REPLAN (Wales) to build bridges from AE into mainstream'.

10. Failure of institutions to embed innovations brought about by 'seed corn' funding, either through lack of will or lack of resources.

All the foregoing prompts the conclusion that progression statistics on their own are meaningless, as they do not take account of the wide disparities in the range and quality of learning opportunities offered to adults in different parts of the country. Information on adult progression between different forms and levels of education and training needs to be put into context. If background evidence – on the available learning opportunities, the mechanisms that exist to promote progression between levels of learning and between institutions, and the support provided to sustain student progression – is not supplied to supplement local or institutional statistics, there is a danger that an ostensible lack of movement between different levels of learning may be interpreted as lack of interest, motivation or ability on the part of adult learners. This in turn may reinforce and perpetuate the view of general, uncertificated adult education as primarily the leisure and recreational pursuit of people who can afford to participate.

4. Conclusions

In England and Wales hard data on adult learning routes is currently sparse, although there is substantial anecdotal evidence of progression from uncertificated to certificated learning:

> *'Few institutions have procedures to identify the sources and types of non-traditional students, the courses they attend, retention rates and progression routes on completion'* (HMI, *1989, 8*).

This project indicates that the recording of student data in institutions and organisations continues to be patchy and idiosyncratic. Information is not always computerised and manual records require more staff time than is generally available to undertake searches. Methods of data collection vary widely both between institutions and between different areas of a single institution. One respondent reported that the most detailed information comes from full-time college lecturers teaching on uncertificated and certificated courses; another that it is more likely to be available from those teaching modular courses.

A considerable obstacle to the systematic tracking of adult learning routes is the fact that uncertificated and certificated courses are often taught in different institutions. These may have no structural links and may employ different methods of collecting information. Although further education institutions are moving towards use of standardised information systems, there is as yet no standardised method of statistics collection in adult continuing education. A further obstacle to systematic data collection has been the overall pace of change. Some higher education respondents referred to the 'fluidity' of the Access scene. Many institutions have undergone a series of organisational and structural changes in recent years entailing new job responsibilities and titles. In some cases these changes have disrupted access arrangements and links between institutions as well as the collection of student data.

The evidence overall suggests that systematic evidence is difficult and expensive to collect. Most institutions currently track students on a selective rather than comprehensive basis, particularly those involved in Access, preparatory or bridging courses. However, existing 'tracking' tends to be limited to student destinations. Further and higher education institutions do not, as a rule, ask mature students whether they have previously engaged in uncertificated adult education, although one institution – South Bristol College – has begun to do this as part of its institutional evaluation strategy. To elicit this information a question on prior learning could be included in enrolment forms, but it would need to be carefully framed so as to make clear that it refers to any uncertificated forms of learning. Institutions also need to devise cost-effective and transferable ways of collecting statistics and other

data on adult learners, while avoiding the problem of slotting students into inappropriate boxes. Given the importance of the whole question of educational progression, cost considerations should not inhibit the collection of this data

FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

The project highlights the need for further research in two main areas.

1. In order to provide a coherent body of information on which to base policy, there needs to be greater harmonisation of statistics and other recorded student data in organisations providing adult continuing education. A further study is therefore required to identify or devise effective methods of improving the collection and harmonisation of statistics and other student data.

2. There needs to be a large-scale project to evaluate the real scale of progression to advanced certificated education and training of people who have re-entered education via uncertificated adult or community learning. This might take the form of a longitudinal study of specific cohorts of mature students in a specific institution – say a polytechnic or the Open University – or in an Open College Network.

WHY INFORMATION ON LEARNING ROUTES IS NEEDED

As increasing numbers of adults seek to re-enter further and higher education by 'non-standard' routes, there clearly needs to be more information on their starting points and destinations. The information gap has been thrown into sharp relief by the proposals in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (May 1991) and the subsequent Further and Higher Education Bill published in November 1991. The White Paper proposed removing from public subsidies a large part of general adult education, notably those courses which are not certificated or designed to improve access to mainstream vocational or academic programmes. New further education councils would be responsible for funding:

- courses leading to academic or vocational qualifications
- Access courses which prepare people for entry to higher education
- Return to Learn courses which help people to enter qualification-bearing courses or courses giving access to higher education
- courses offering basic skills in literacy and numeracy
- courses in English (or Welsh) for speakers of other languages
- courses for people with special educational needs.

Other types of course would be financed by student fees.

This proposal provoked widespread opposition from people working in all educational sectors on the grounds that it would place general, uncertificated adult education out of the reach of many who could not afford full-cost fees; it would create an artificial and detrimental divide between different types of learning at a time when the boundaries between them were becoming increasingly blurred, and this would

weaken or eliminate current learning progression routes (see Appendix 1).

In response to the ensuing debate the proposals were subsequently modified. The Further and Higher Education Bill stipulates that LEAs would retain the duty to secure 'adequate facilities for the provision of all kinds of further education for adults which do not fall to the duty of the new Funding Councils'. However, a number of concerns remain: curbs on public spending may make it exceedingly difficult for many LEAs to secure what they define as 'adequate' provision at current fee levels. Moreover, the proposals still make a sharp division between uncertificated and certificated courses at a time when centres and institutions have been increasingly bringing them together in recognition of the benefits to adult learners in terms of continuity and progression:

> *'The successful format of adult provision developed in Oldham depends on the interaction between leisure classes, self-activation groups and vocational training. It is in the interaction between these that our strength lies, many people being drawn to their first post-school education experience by the comfortable local identity of the centres, then discovering the accessibility of vocational education. Many people have joined a leisure class only to progress to GCSEs then perhaps to a career change' (communication from Shaw Centre, July 1991).*

The Bill's proposals are based on an assumption that there is limited progression between uncertificated and certificated learning and that LEAs will be readily able to identify those courses which lead to participation in higher levels of further and higher education. However, all the evidence points to the difficulty of determining which courses lead to further participation and the impossibility of predicting students' purposes from course titles alone:

> *'My guess is that in one typical LEA "leisure" class half the students will use that class to gain access to a further qualification in the subject while in another, none would. Is one class to transfer to the funding council, the other not?' (Fullick, 1991).*

There is also a concern that the use of the word 'leisure' to describe courses which are not ostensibly work-related or qualification-bearing has misleading connotations of affluence and lack of serious purpose.

Responses to this project suggest that any type of uncertificated course can be undertaken by adults for instrumental reasons and any can inspire the confidence and desire to move into formal education and training:

> *'My gut feeling is that the importance of adult education for our enquirers is very great. If you don't recognise the informal routes that allow people to progress in a variety of ways, then you'll remove the important stepping stones' (educational guidance worker, London).*

> *'It is my remaining impression from both adult and higher education experience that many adult students do begin to develop their interests and ambitions in general uncertificated adult and community education' (polytechnic staff member).*

Although this short pilot project could yield only limited evidence of the nature and scale of movement between different levels of learning, the information received does imply that large numbers of adult learners move from uncertificated general adult education into certificated further education *in places and institutions where there are conditions and mechanisms which favour such progression.* Notable among these are:

- educational guidance services with good referral procedures
- staff encouragement and knowledge of other learning opportunities
- clear progression routes in the form of structured learning levels and links between general adult (including basic education and ESOL) and mainstream courses (some colleges with outreach programmes which offer tasters and a mix of uncertificated general courses and certificated mainstream programmes on the same site can demonstrate a high level of progression from lower level courses into mainstream)
- close links between sectors and institutions such as those encouraged by Open College Networks or Access consortia.

There is, as expected, evidence of high rates of progression from courses designed as an educational starting point rather than as an end in themselves: Access, Return to Learn, etc. However, there is also evidence that many students actually reach this type of course via prior participation in general, uncertificated courses, basic education or English for speakers of other language courses. This suggests that for many individuals Access and Return to Learn-type courses are the second rather than, as is generally believed, the first stage in the return to learn process.

Data on students involved in some community education programmes reveals that a large percentage subsequently move into certificated vocational or academic programmes, with some subject areas particularly popular: computing and word-processing, Access courses, language courses, courses specifically for women, book-keeping and courses designed to help individuals start or maintain their own businesses. This suggests that whatever a person's motive in starting learning, instrumental purposes often govern the next step, but that without prior participation in a general, uncertificated course, many individuals would not have had the confidence, the enthusiasm or the awareness of educational opportunities to take that second step. This is in line with the findings of other research:

> *'A distinctive feature of ILEA adult education institutes was that they offered a tentative first step for people whose aims had not yet reached the stage of saying "I want to study GCSE English" or "I want to get on a training course at college". The best of adult education in London moved students on from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and motivated them to take further courses, often of an academic or vocational type' (Payne, 1991, 8–10).*

Information from a guidance service in Gwent suggests that general, uncertificated adult education is also sometimes the preferred starting point of adults who have already made a decision to undertake higher level, certificated study and want to be 'eased' back into the practice of learning through adult education, which provides: 'a confidence-booster and a more flexible and accommodating progression to (higher level) courses'.

The role of adult education as a route back into vocational education and training is increasingly recognised in other countries. In Denmark, the realisation that participation in general education motivates many unemployed people to participate in employment training programmes has led to calls for schemes which cut across the 'strongly sector-oriented adult education tradition' in that country (CEDEFOP, 1989, 47). In Australia, the three principal participant typologies in employment-related adult continuing education have been identified as: the young, particularly those with higher socio-economic status backgrounds; males in full-time jobs; and those who come through crafts, non-accredited life skills or 'liberal' adult education programmes (Evans, 1988).

Without the kind of preparation and bridging adult education courses provide, many individuals will not manage the move back into the formal training that is the ostensible goal of government. According to a worker with a London guidance service: 'we see people coming back from unsuccessful attempts to get back into employment and higher level courses because they're not ready.' This is not to say that provision for adults should be planned with the sole aim of pushing students up the educational ladder: this is not feasible, especially for many of those starting at a basic education level. Nor can it be claimed that the majority of students enter general or community education with the clear intention of starting on a process of educational progression. In many cases, progression to more advanced certificated courses is the unplanned result of participation in general, uncertificated programmes. Nevertheless, the evidence is that many do embark on that process even when unplanned, and every effort should be made to facilitate their progress.

LACK OF PROGRESSION ROUTES

However, the project indicates that lack of coherent progression routes is still a substantial drawback to adult movement between stages of learning. Educational progression requires links between sectors and institutions, and resources and mechanisms that favour those links. A recent HMI report on adult education has observed that the machinery available to co-ordinate the efforts of the various providers is mostly inadequate, and that the costs of administering such co-ordination have often discouraged developments (HMI, 1991b, 7). Nevertheless, the facilitating of inter-agency links is currently in favour:

> *'We want to see a guaranteed progression of opportunities from basic education all the way to higher education' (Tim Eggar, Minister of State, at the NIACE conference for LEA Members and Officers, 1991).*

> *'We must maintain a system of ladders and bridges from FE into HE' (Professor Graeme Davies, Chief Executive, Universities Funding Council, at the NIACE conference for LEA Members and Officers, 1991).*

To enable genuine progression there needs to be a system of ladders and bridges across the entire adult, further and higher education system. However, recent developments such as the demise of the REPLAN programme have destroyed some of the inter-agency co-operation developed during the 1980s and the effects of some of the proposals in the Further Education Bill may accelerate this process:

> *'Time and time again research has demonstrated that opportunities for adults only evolve when the whole post-initial sector contributes to its development. Yet again in London we will enter a period of organisational upheaval which will break down networks carefully created over time. In Lewisham as elsewhere, a network of local frontline centres exists to stimulate demand and provide the bridge into other institutions' (Fullick, 1991).*

An obvious and tested way of maintaining ladders and bridges is through the Open College Networks which are systematically developing structured learning levels and systems of credit accumulation and transfer across the different education sectors and institutions in different parts of England and Wales:

> *'There must be a mechanism through which the availability of a progression route can be demonstrated. OCNs offer the most readily available and well-tested approach to this problem' (McNair, 1991).*

But even institutions with good inter-agency links sometimes let mature students down. Some post-literacy students who participated in College Links and Adult Foundation Courses in London eventually returned to the Reading Centre where they had started: 'because there was nowhere else to go. They needed to move on in small steps. To go back so as to go forward again was not what they really needed. The education system did not provide this next step' (Temple 1991, 25).

VARYING ACCESS TO INSTITUTIONS

As this suggests, adult progression to higher level learning is closely related to the efforts made by institutions to widen access to 'non-standard' students and provide them with adequate support for the duration of their learning:

> *'Access can't be achieved through the boundless good faith of well-meaning staff on the margins of HE institutions or through the generalised rhetoric of management. Both of these give rise to gaps which are unbridgeable' (statement made at conference on Access Co-ordinators in Higher Education, City University, 6 December 1991).*

Access to institutions is governed by institutional admissions policies (and those who control them) and these vary widely, although Dr Roger

Brown, Chief Executive of the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics, has claimed in response to the 1991 White Paper on further education and training that adult education courses are now a significant pool for recruiting students to polytechnic courses.

There has been a general thrust towards widening access to higher education since the early 1980s, spearheaded by the former National Advisory Body, the Universities Grants Council and, more recently, by the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council, which in 1990 made widening access for under-represented groups a key factor in sector development. However, a number of changes have occurred which may put this policy at risk. The new funding arrangements for higher education have led higher education institutions to be concerned more with increasing than with widening access. At a time of rising levels of participation among the 18-plus cohort, this prompts the question, will the income-led approach to recruitment together with the absence of institutional need for an additional supply of students undermine the principle of wider access even before it has been fully achieved?

Finally, one cannot discount the impact of financial and domestic factors on people's ability to participate in further study or training. Lack of financial support and childcare are cited by many people as the major reasons for not seeking more advanced education or training. A survey conducted in Norfolk identified the main barriers to adult participation in training as:

- lack of affordable childcare support
- financial barriers arising from unforeseen marginal costs (such as examination fees)
- charges for basic skills training (higher than in many other LEAs)
- 'prohibitively' expensive fees for open learning and home-delivered training for adults living in rural areas or those temporarily housebound (DeBell and Davies, 1991).

There is still official reluctance to accept the extent to which the combined effects of low income, domestic constraints and cuts in public services such as nursery provision put a brake on the education and training aspirations of many of those who wish to return to training and education or progress to higher level courses.

Appendix 1

A sample of responses to the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century.*

Committee of Directors of Polytechnics

'Courses which provide for the leisure interests of adults have an established role in developing students' potential for continued study in further and higher education. There are progressive moves to accredit such courses.'

Federation of Community Work Training Groups

'Most of the groups with whom our organisation has been involved would not re-enter education if the only routes available were through vocationally-oriented classes.'

Northamptonshire LEA

'About 80% of adult education enrolments (27,000 in a year) are women. Some will be pursuing leisure interests but for many it will be a step towards contributing to the economic well-being of themselves, their families or the local community.'

Pre-School Playgroups Association

'The overwhelming majority of our students are women, many without formal qualifications. For them a short course, apparently non-vocational, may be the first positive experience of education since leaving home.'

South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council

'Groups formed in the pursuit of a leisure interest frequently progress to examination work and become more vocationally oriented. Progression to further learning is most successfully achieved in circumstances where distinctions between non-vocational and vocational study are minimised and by provision which gives parity to both elements within a wide-ranging adult education programme.'

Stockport LEA

'Local examples abound of courses which have provided adult students with the first rung of the ladder leading to work-related learning.'

Universities Council for Adult and Continuing Education

'Many people recommence their education at the most unlikely starting points and acquire learning competency and transferable skills which enable them to progress to further or higher education or career development from so-called non-vocational adult education.'

Voluntary Adult Education Forum

'Adults, particularly those without formal qualifications, can gain motivation and confidence from an informal discussion group based on common social or recreational interests, an art class or a Return to Study course, which may then act as a springboard to further or higher education. Much more often than not, these activities are not immediately seen as "access" courses.'

Wandsworth College

'In Wandsworth, non-vocational courses are often structured to lead directly to certificated offers as one possible outcome. This acts as a very important element in the "access" programme.'

WEA

'Many "leisure" courses provide routes back into education for those who left school some time ago. It is on these courses that they gain the skills, confidence and knowledge to develop further – into further and higher education, into employment or into further work-related training.'

Appendix 2

I am very grateful to the following for sending information, comments and suggestions relevant to the pilot project:

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Jonathon Buchan, *House of Commons*

Sheila Clarke, *Community Education Division, South Bristol AE Area*

Pam Cole, *YHAFHE*

David Coombs, *Educational Guidance for Adults, Abercynon*

W.R.F. Cunningham, *International Co-operative College*

Joyce Deere, *South Nottingham College of Further Education*

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Roger Tovey, *South West Wales Open College Access Federation*

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Elizabeth Weightman, *WEA South Western District*

Dr David Wilson, *Adult Education Office, Northampton*

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adult learning

At a time when growing numbers of adults are moving into education and training, it is becoming increasingly important to provide empirical evidence about the routes they take.

It is often taken for granted that adults return to certificated learning via general, non-certificated education. However, very little hard data on adult learners' starting points and destinations has been gathered.

The pilot project reported here was designed to test the hypothesis that adult involvement in uncertificated learning (formal and informal) often leads to more advanced forms of education and training. Evidence was sought from a range of institutions and organisations, including educational guidance services, access consortia, open college federations, residential colleges, FE colleges, adult and community education services and voluntary bodies.

This report focuses on key issues:

To what extent do adults move from lower to higher levels of learning?
Who is collecting this information and how ought it to be collected?
What are the support, curriculm and management issues raised by progression from one stage and form of learning to another?

There is currently no standardised form of data collection in adult continuing education. This, the report argues, is urgently required in order to provide a coherent body of information on which future policy for the education and training of adults can be based.

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